

Gunnison Sage-Grouse

Threatened Designation and Responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act



Male Gunnison sage-grouse displaying on a lek / © Mike Danzenbaker

Gunnison sage-grouse designated as threatened

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that the Gunnison sage-grouse warrants protection as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. The Service evaluated all the available scientific and commercial information regarding the Gunnison sage-grouse, including an analysis of the threats to the species and its sagebrush habitat, and concluded that the species is threatened due to habitat loss and fragmentation, small population size, urban development, disease and drought.

What is a Gunnison sage-grouse ?

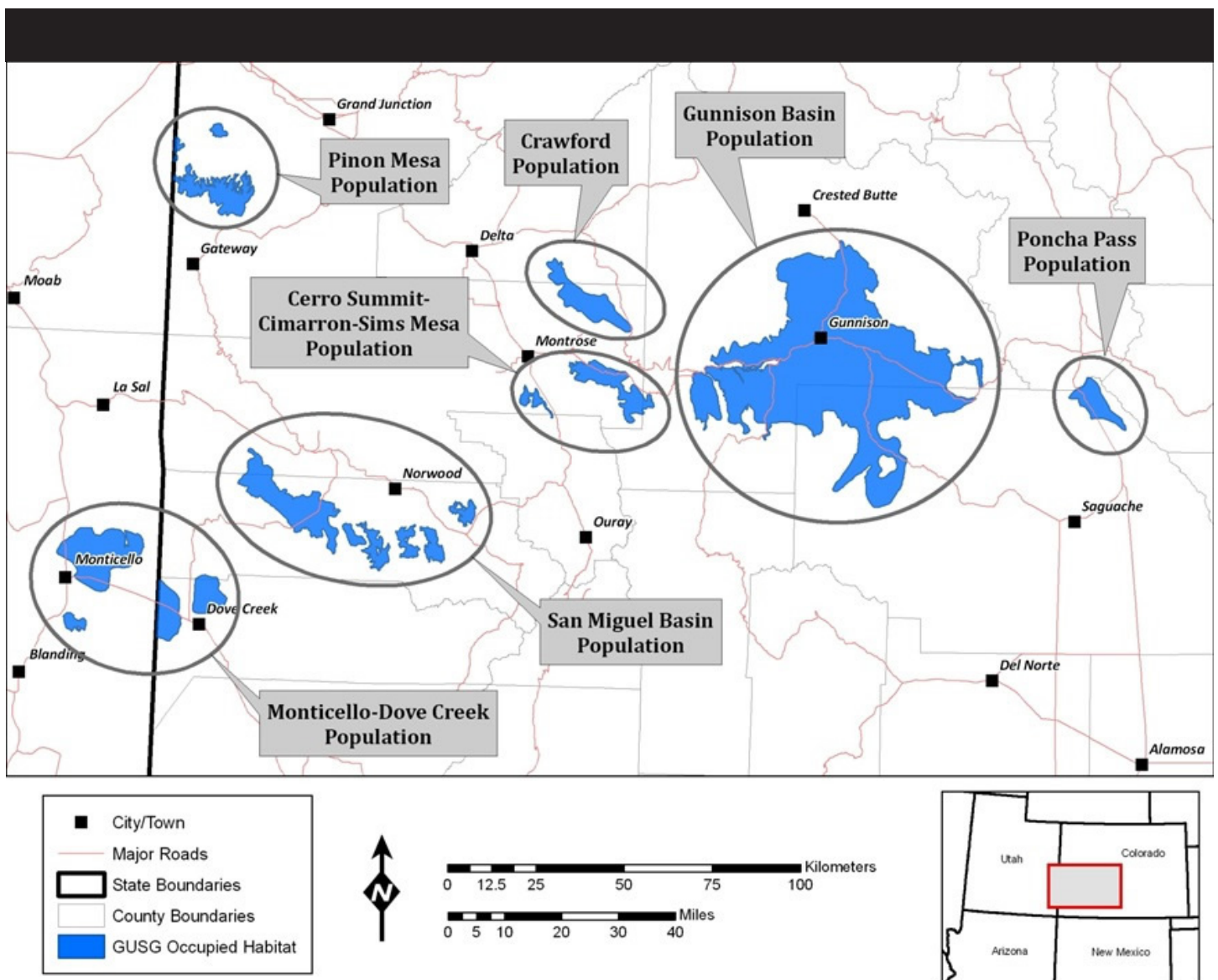
Gunnison sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*) are charismatic ground-dwelling birds known for their elaborate mating ritual where males congregate on leks (breeding grounds) and strut, or “dance”, to attract mates. Gunnison sage-grouse are most easily identified by their large size, dark brown color, distinctive black bellies, long, pointed tails, and association with sagebrush habitats. During the breeding season, males have conspicuous filoplumes (specialized neck feathers), a black bib on a white upper breast, and yellow-green air sacs on the chest. Hens have drab, cryptic plumage that helps them hide from predators.

Habitat: Sage-grouse are considered obligate users of sagebrush and require large, contiguous areas of sagebrush across the landscape for long-term survival. Several species of sagebrush provide the specific food, cover, and reproduction habitats critical for sage-grouse survival. Loss and fragmentation of sagebrush habitats are chief causes in the decline of Gunnison and greater sage-grouse populations.

Population Size and Trends: The current rangewide population is estimated at 4705 birds across the seven population areas. The Gunnison Basin population contains over 84 percent of the total number of birds and constitutes the largest remaining population. The six satellite populations are much smaller, isolated and are declining. The Gunnison Basin population trend has been stable over the same period.

Name	2014 Population	Population Target	Last at target?	Population low in yr	Transplants since yr
Gunnison Basin	3978	3000	2011-2013	2500 in 2003-4	-367 since 2006
Crawford	157	275	1998	~20 in 2010	+ 73 since 2011
San Miguel	206	450	1998	~90 in 2011	+ 83 since 2006
Pinon Mesa	182	200	n/a	~52 in 2012	+ 93 since 2010
Dove Creek	~25	200	2000	<10 in 2004 & 2009	+44 since 2010
Monticello	~75	300	1999	~75 in 2013 & 2014	None
Cerro Summit/ Cimmaron/ Simms Mesa	~75	100	n/a	~5 in 2010	+ 6 in 2000
Poncha Pass	~10	75	n/a	0 in 2013	+ 68 since 2000 +27 since 2013

Population Size and Trends Table: Data from CPW & FWS



Gunnison sage-grouse population range map

Range: The range of Gunnison sage-grouse closely matches the distribution of sagebrush habitats. Historically, the range of the Gunnison sage-grouse included parts of central and southwestern Colorado, southeastern Utah, northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona. The current range of Gunnison sage-grouse is limited to southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. Approximately 940,000 acres (380,000 hectares) of habitat are occupied by the species. Of this, about 54 percent occurs on Federal lands; 43 percent occurs on private lands; and three percent occurs on state lands. Gunnison sage-grouse occupy approximately seven percent of the species' potential historic range.

Taxonomy: Gunnison sage-grouse were recognized as distinct from greater sage-grouse in 2000, based on physical, genetic and behavioral differences, as well as geographic isolation between the two species.

What are threats to the species?

- The most substantial current and future threats include habitat loss and decline due to human development and associated infrastructure. One population appears stable at approximately 4,000+ birds, but six satellite populations are in varying states of decline or are significantly below population objectives.
- Based on the best available information, some of the satellite populations are unlikely to

persist into the foreseeable future (40-60 years), especially in the face of current and future threats identified above. Multiple populations across a broad geographic area are required for species survival

- Other threats that are impacting Gunnison sage-grouse to a lesser degree include overgrazing, mineral development, piñon-juniper encroachment, fences, invasive plants, fire, large scale water development, predation (primarily associated with human disturbance and habitat decline), and recreation. The fragmented nature of the remaining habitat amplifies the negative effects of other threats.

What is being done to prevent the extinction of Gunnison sage-grouse?

The Service applauds the numerous, effective conservation actions undertaken by Gunnison County, by Colorado Parks and Wildlife and by local citizens. This work is the primary reason that the Service listed the species as threatened, rather than endangered. Some of the major efforts include:

- Research by Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), the U.S. Geological Survey, and other academia has and continues to provide critical biological information for the species.
- Counties across the species' range have worked to conserve the bird. Gunnison sage-grouse local working groups have developed conservation plans for six of the seven Gunnison sage-grouse populations.
- CPW has completed or is completing a total of 40 private-land Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances for Gunnison sage-grouse comprising 94,734 acres, including 54,436 acres in the Gunnison Basin.
- CPW was a key player in development of the Rangewide Conservation Plan, a cohesive effort to conserve Gunnison sage-grouse rangewide.
- Numerous land trust organizations, Colorado Open Lands, CPW, The Nature Conservancy and others have secured 138,008 acres of conservation easements that will prevent subdivision and fragmentation of sage-grouse habitat.
- The Bureau of Land Management, CPW, Gunnison and Saguache County worked with other federal agencies and the Service to complete a Candidate Conservation Agreement addressing threats to sage-grouse habitat in the Gunnison Basin on approximately 395,000 acres of federal land, or roughly two-thirds of the occupied habitat in the largest population.
- In 2013, the eleven counties in Gunnison sage-grouse range completed a Memorandum of Understanding and Conservation Agreement to identify strategies and measures to conserve Gunnison sage-grouse.
- In 2014, the Bureau of Land Management initiated its Resource Management Plan amendment process for more than 625,000 surface acres in 10 Colorado counties and two in Utah.
- While the BLM completes its rangewide plan updates, the agency issued an Instruction Memorandum that closes oil and gas leasing, excludes new energy development, and establishes a 4-mile buffer around leks where disturbance would be avoided or minimized.
- The Service is coordinating with federal agencies to design federal projects for ESA compliance and to benefit Gunnison sage-grouse.
- The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe has adopted a species management plan to protect the bird.
- Numerous habitat improvement projects have occurred and are being proposed in Gunnison sage-grouse habitats.

How does the listing affect me?

The “take³” of species listed under the Endangered Species Act is prohibited. Significant habitat modification or degradation have the potential to harm Gunnison sage-grouse and may result in take of the species. The Service can provide technical assistance to landowners who have concerns regarding impacts on Gunnison sage-grouse or its habitat.

Federal Agencies: Under Section 7(a)(4) of the ESA, Federal agencies are required to consult with the Service on any consultation that may affect a species or its critical habitat.

Now that the Gunnison sage-grouse is listed and critical habitat is designated, federal agencies are required to utilize their authorities pursuant to Section 7(a)(1) of the ESA by carrying out programs for the conservation of the species. Section 7(a)(2) also requires that Federal agencies consult with the Service, when actions they authorize, fund, or carry out may affect a listed species to ensure the actions are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of listed species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat.



Pair of Gunnison sage-grouse / USFWS

The ESA section 7(a)(1) and 7(a)(2) mandates described above would apply only to Federal agencies and lands; these standards would not apply on private, state, or other non-Federal lands, except where there is a Federal nexus (e.g., Federal funding or permit). State, County, City, and Private Entities: Coordination with the Service on projects that may affect proposed species or proposed critical habitat is not required under the ESA. However, if there is a Federal nexus on non-Federal lands or with a non-Federal project (e.g., Federal funding or permit), conferencing with the Service may be required.

What is a 4(d) rule and what happens to landowners between the effective date of the listing and the time the final 4(d) rule is finalized?

The Service intends to propose a 4(d) rule, which would exempt many ongoing activities, such as properly managed farming and ranching, from ESA review. We recognize that there will be some period of time between when the final listing rule is effective and when a final rule under 4(d) is effective. During this period, the full provisions of the ESA will apply and all “take” of the species will be prohibited without a permit.

However, that does not mean all activities must stop. There are a number of ways the Service can work with individuals or entities that are proposing projects that may affect the Gunnison sage grouse. We encourage any individual, agency, or entity that is working within the range of the Gunnison sage grouse to contact the Service so that we can provide the best technical assistance for the specific action being proposed.

What can I do?

Conserve: Consider enrolling your property in conservation programs such as conservation agreements, conservation easements, and similar tools (see <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/landowners/landowner-tools.html>). These programs often benefit the species as well as the

landowners. The Service works with landowners, Tribes, and Federal and State agencies to forge conservation agreements that benefit listed species and species-at-risk. We provide technical assistance on designing and implementing conservation actions to address threats to these species.

Footnotes/Terms

¹ An endangered species is one that is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

² Critical habitat includes specific areas that contain the physical or biological features essential to the species’ conservation.

³ Take means to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect or attempt to engage in any such conduct; harm is further defined to include significant habitat modification or degradation that results in death or injury to listed species by significantly impairing behavioral patterns such as breeding, feeding, or sheltering; harass includes actions that create the likelihood of injury to listed species to such an extent as to significantly disrupt normal behavior patterns including, but not limited to, breeding, feeding, or sheltering.

More Information

Connect with us at the Mountain-Prairie Region
Regional Website: <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/>

Regional Facebook site:
<http://www.facebook.com/USFWSMountainPrairie>

Regional Twitter page:
<http://twitter.com/USFWSmtnpairie>

Regional Flickr page:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwsmtnpairie/>

News releases can be found at:
<http://onlinepressroom.net/fws/>

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Region 6**

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